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Author(s): JOHN O. VOLL

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THE MAHDĪ'S CONCEPT AND USE OF 'HIJRAH'

JOHN O. VOLL

The concept of "the hijrah" plays a variety of important roles in Islamic explanations. Throughout Islamic history, the concept and image of the hijrah has been an important part of the explanations and debates of major Muslim thinkers. The concept has been used by these teachers in different social and historical contexts. One way of gaining a better understanding of this significant concept is to study how it is used in the writings and teaching of various Muslim leaders in different eras and regions. One such teacher whose writings are worth examining is Muḥammad ibn ʿAbdallāh al-Mahdī, who lived in the Sudan in the nineteenth century.

"Hijrah" is usually thought of in terms of a specific historical event in the life of the Muslim community. "The Hijrah" is, of course, the emigration of Muḥammad and his community from Makkah to Madinah. The article, "Hidjra" by W. Montgomery Watt in the new edition of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*[1] provides a good example of this type of understanding of "hijrah". It deals almost exclusively with "Hijrah" in the sense of one specific historic event. There is a brief note on the usage of words of the "h-j-r" root in the Qur'ān and a brief mention that a Kharijite leader spoke of those people who came to his camp as having undertaken "hijrah." However, basically the term is applied to that event in 622 C.E. which is the beginning of the Islamic calendar era. Such an approach is not in error since clearly, every Muslim, regardless of the historical context, will carry some image of the hijrah of the Prophet Muḥammad whenever the term is formally used.

It is important to see, however, that the concept carries a much broader set of meanings, even when they are in some way based on the specific historical event of the Prophet's hijrah. A study of Muslim conceptualization of the duties of Muslims living outside of Dār al-Islām can reveal, for example, that the concept of hijrah played a broader role in Islamic explanations than is often thought. Muslim minorities were often said to have two effective alternatives, either they could exert themselves to transform the society in which they found themselves into Dār al-Islām

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territories or they should emigrate, that is, undertake a hijrah.[2] This line of research reveals material from a variety of areas of the Islamic world where the concept of hijrah had this broader meaning. One of the most clearly studied cases is the writings of Usuman dan Fodio and the west African revivalist movements of the early nineteenth century[3].

In addition, in recent years more attention has been given to the conceptual content of contemporary Islamic revivalist thinkers. In the works of people like Abū'l-A'lā Mawdūdī and Sayyid Quṭb the concept of hijrah emerges as an important part of their basic socio-theological approach. This has been highlighted by the emphasis given to the concept in the works of their followers, like the "Takfīr wa al-hijrah" group in Egypt.

It is in this context that it appears useful to examine the use of the concept of hijrah in the writings of Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Mahdī in the Sudan. A check of the index to Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Sālim's guide to the documents of the Mahdi confirms that the Mahdi mentions or discusses "hijrah" in a significant number of his letters and proclamations.[4] It should be remembered that the index to Abū Sālim's *al-Murshid* refers to names and terms in the compiler's descriptive entries. It is not a concordance for the Mahdī's writings. However, Abū Sālim's summaries of the contents of the documents are a very effective and accurate guide to what appears in those documents, and the index is a good summary reflection of their contents and concerns.

In the index, the entries with the largest number of document citations [the index lists document number rather than page number as the reference] are easily predicted. Certain personal and place names closely associated with the development of the Mahdist movement have the most entries: Khartūm and al-Khalīfah 'Abdallāhī, understandably, are the two with the most document numbers given in the index entry (91 and 89 respectively). The two with the next largest number of document citations are related to categories to whom many letters were addressed; thus, "governor" ('āmil/'umalā') and "commander" (amīr/umarā') have 87 and 79 documents noted, respectively. There are also additional personal names which have relatively large numbers, like Aḥmad Sulaymān with 69.

If one looks for the entries that relate to concepts or administrative, organizational, or theological terms, there are four that head the list in that category:

booty (*al-ghanāyim*)	70
the treasury (*Bayt al-Māl*)	63

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Jihād	60
al-hijrah	54

These are considerably more frequently mentioned than the next conceptual/administrative entries:

women (*al-nisā'*)	37
arms and ammunition (*al-salāḥ wa al-jabkhānah*)	30
marriage (*zawāj*)	29
decisions of the Mahdiyyah and punishments (*aḥkām al-Mahdiyyah wa al-ḥudūd*)	28
army (*al-jaysh*)	27

This tabulation needs to be viewed with some caution because it does not necessarily represent a ranking of importance in terms of overall Mahdist thinking. It simply notes the frequency with which certain issues were mentioned in letters and proclamations with strong enough emphasis that those issues would also be mentioned in a summary of the contents, as prepared by Abū Sālim. This reservation is strengthened by noting that some important terms are not high in ranking by number of citations, e.g.:

the Mahdi's devotional exercise (*ratib*)	22
alms (*zakah*)	19
oath of allegiance (*bay'ah*)	15
prayer (*ṣalāh*)	13

It may be helpful to note that the most frequently cited terms are those which are related to the current activities and efforts of the Mahdist groups. They relate to the processes of fighting, recruitment, and establishment of control. Terms that are more closely tied to daily routines are less likely to be the focus of correspondence, even though they may be very important in the general structure of Mahdist thought and life.

This distinction in itself helps to place the concept of "hijrah" in Mahdist thought. It is a crisis term, relating to the efforts to establish the Mahdist order rather than a term oriented toward the routines of regular life. As such, it is frequently found in the letters and proclamations of the Mahdi, as summarized by Abū Sālim. The elaboration of its role in Mahdist thought can be seen through taking some of these proclamations and examining them in more detail.

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The simplest view of the role of the concept of hijrah is one that appears in a number of early Western studies. The Mahdi is said to have attempted to duplicate the life of the Prophet Muḥammad as a way of persuading people to follow him. In some of these accounts there is a strong implication that the Mahdī was doing this simply for propaganda purposes. J. Spencer Trimingham, for example, says about the Mahdi:

> When convinced of his call, in order to provide the superstitious background, he selected from the mass of vague undigested Mahdist tradition those elements which applied to himself... and doctored others such as the site of Jabal Massa[5].

Similarly, although in somewhat more sympathetic terms, Richard Bermann (in the old classic, *The Mahdi of Allah*)[6] speaks of the hijrah in Mahdism simply as following the pattern of the Prophet's life. In his account of the events after the first victory over government troops, at Aba Island, Bermann says:

> Great indeed was the victory of the faithful——said the Khalifa——and henceforth none would resist the Anṣār; but it was decreed that, like Mohammed, the envoy of God, Mohammed the Mahdi also had to accomplish a flight, to Mount Masa. This was the twelve hundred and eighty-ninth year after the Hegira of Mohammed. With this new Hegira the new age of Islam began.[7]

Reginald Wingate simply says that the Mahdi referred to the move to the Nuba Mountain "as his hejira or flight, in imitation of the great prophet, whose hejira from Mecca to Medina marks the commencement of the Mussulman era."[8]

It is clear that the Mahdī did use the term hijrah in this general manner. He did refer to his movement from Aba Island to Jabal Qadir as a "hijrah," and that historical moment was critical in the evolution of the Mahdiyyah. However, this usage of the term hijrah was not simply a way of justifying the need to move out of the centrally located Aba Island in order to avoid punitive military expeditions from Khartoum.[9]

Scholars like Peter Holt[10] and Carl Brown[11] see it as a part of a broader effort on the part of the Mahdi to re-enact the events of the first years of the Islamic community. Holt notes that the "call to the *hijra* is the earliest example of a conscious parallel between the career of the Prophet and that of the Mahdi... But the Mahdi's use of prophetic parallels was not a blind antiquarianism... The Mahdi made highly intelligent use of prophetic precedents to guide him in the difficulties of his career."

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The Mahdi, even before his own necessary move from Aba Island to Jabal Qadir, was in fact making use of the concept of hijrah. Holt suggests the Turco-Egyptian expedition may have disrupted the Mahdi's plans for movement following the first manifestation of his mission as Mahdi. There is a letter from the Mahdi written before the incident at Aba Island with the government forces that is worth examining to see the early use of the concept of hijrah. This letter was to Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib al-Baṣīr, the Mahdi's agent in the Gezira area, written on 1 Sha'bān 1298/ 29 June 1881.[12]

The letter to Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib is one of the earliest letters in which the Mahdī publicly announced his mission. It contains the basic presentation of the Mahdi's case, although in simpler form than it appears in later letters. It is worthwhile to examine the place of the concept of hijrah in this early letter, since it comes before the departure of the Mahdi himself from Aba Island and thus before the Mahdi's own hijrah.

The letter begins basically with a usage of hijrah. After all of the appropriate greetings, the Mahdī's first statement is: "It is not concealed from the greatness of your knowledge that the person who is with God and leaves his own pleasures and emigrates to God does not fear anything nor is he afraid of anyone."[13] The person who emigrates, that is, who undertakes a hijrah, is promised victory and his safety and sustenance is guaranteed. This statement is then followed by an incitement to Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib to encourage all of the people to undertake the hijrah to the Mahdi. The disciples are to be incited to leave their residences and properties in order to be able to exert themselves in support of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah.

Simply put, in this letter, hijrah is leaving residences and properties behind in order to serve God. "This world" is a deception and the call to undertake a hijrah is a call to action in terms of proper priorities. The Mahdi, in this letter, reminds the followers that if one loses both worlds (the here and the hereafter) he will get no benefit from properties or residences anyway.

Following this first section, the letter to Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib describes the visions which validate the Mahdī's mission. The term hijrah does not again formally appear. There are, however, some observations and instructions which are reported to have been presented in the course of the validating vision of the Prophet. The Mahdī is told to make sure that when he goes to Qadir, those who go with him are sincere and do not have any reservations in their mind. The Mahdī's path is said to include twelve features: the general ṭarīqah involves humility, meekness, little food, little to drink, patience, and visiting the Sayyids (in their tombs) while the

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Mahdiyyah has fighting, resolution, prudence, reliance upon and support from God Almighty and unity of expression. People following this should be admonished to avoid envy, deceit, and neglect of prayer.

In this letter there seems to be the implication that undertaking the hijrah means coming to the Mahdi and following the twelve point path that is described. It is a simple statement of the requirement that people should not be so tied to their possessions that they should not be willing to follow God. Actual physical movement is not absolutely required since the letter recognizes that some would not be able to come to the Mahdi and thus, the letter says, "All of those who cannot come to me, let them make the oath of allegiance to you, since the oath made to you is deemed the same as the oath made to me."

At the same time, it is worth noting that this early letter does seem to anticipate a major move by the Mahdi and many of his followers. The letter presents specific instructions which were given to the Mahdi in his vision of the Prophet. Muḥammad Aḥmad is told to examine those who will come to Jabal Qadir with him very carefully, thus indicating that the trip to Qadir was already anticipated before the attack on the Mahdi's settlement on Aba Island. Anyone having the vices of envy, deceit, and neglect of prayer should be excluded from the group at Qadir, and the women there should be properly covered, "not exposed like the Baqqarah women." However, as these details seem to indicate, the hijrah seems to be seen primarily as leaving the vices of this world and following a proper life.

The place of the concept of hijrah soon is broadened in a significant way. The critical turning point is, of course, the incident which provides the basis for the more commonly known role of the hijrah in discussions of the Mahdiyyah. In Ramaḍān 1298/ August 1881, a government force sent to discipline the Mahdī was defeated by the Anṣār. Following that, the Mahdī led his followers into a more isolated region in Kordofan, establishing a base at Jabal Qadir. This move is what is called the Mahdī's hijrah.

It is in the context of this early struggle where some victories have been achieved but the Mahdiyyah has not yet become a firmly established force that the concept of the hijrah in Mahdist thought takes its characteristic form, with a number of dimensions. A good introduction to these aspects is a more detailed analysis of a major proclamation of the Mahdi. By Sha'bān 1299/July 1882, the basic format for proclaiming the mission of the Mahdiyyah had become set. A document which represents the fully developed form of the presentation is number 36 in Abu Salim's guide, which appears in Shuqayr[14] and the published *Manshūrāt*[15] Holt discusses

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the contents of this standard proclamation of the mission,[16] and Shaked[17] summarizes the content succinctly: "The Mahdi's vision of investiture, proof of his Mahdiship and a call for the *hijra*."

This summary by Shaked provides a clear statement of the importance of the concept of the hijrah at this time, as the third (and action) aspect of the call to the Mahdiyyah. The first two are proclamations of Mahdist fact: the vision of investiture and the proofs, but the hijrah is the instruction to the people as to the appropriate action for them to take in the light of the facts of the Mahdiyyah.

This proclamation begins with a reference to the early Mahdist usage of hijrah. Again the first sentance after the appropriate greetings is a statement noting that the truly wise and faithful leave behind their own purposes and residences in order to establish *al-dīn*. It may not be significant but it is worth noting that verbs with the h-j-r root do not appear in this first section, although the concepts expressed are similar to those in the earlier letter where such verbs were used.

Direct use of h-j-r is, in this standard proclamation of announcement and call, in two other ways which are related but somewhat different in specific implications. It is stated that in the vision of instruction and installation of the Prophet, the Mahdī is commanded to undertake the hijrah to "Masah near Jabal Qadir," and then the Mahdi is told to write about this to all of the responsible people with a general command to them to do the same. It is worth noting that this and similar proclamations do not describe this hijrah of the Mahdī as an examplary action, i.e., following the practice of the Prophet Muḥammad. Instead, the hijrah of the Mahdi is more simply a movement or emigration which was done at the Prophet's command. To the best of my knowledge, there is no letter or proclamation where the Mahdī reports being commanded to follow the example of the Prophet and thus undertake a hijrah. He is simply commanded to emigrate. From the standpoint of the non-Mahdist, this thus gives added validity to Holt's analysis which sees the Mahdi as utilizing prophetic precedents as a guide for solving difficulties rather than a blind antiquarianism of simply copying the Prophet. In fact, given what I was led to expect by many of the studies of the Mahdiyyah, I was surprised to find how little mention there is of the Mahdi's own personal hijrah.

The second direct use of h-j-r in this proclamation is the more common. The hijrah is said to be considered obligatory in the Qur'ān and Sunnah and a number of sūrahs and ḥadīth are cited. In the section of the proclamation which provides these citations, there are two somewhat different themes that can be seen. One,

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which is the minor one, is the emigration involved in fleeing from place to place because of *al-dīn*. In this kind of hijrah, one is a companion of Abraham and Muḥammad. This concept of hijrah as the flight of people who are oppressed because of their dīn is part of the thinking of many Muslims who use the concept of hijrah in discussions and it has a clear Qur'ānic foundation. An often-quoted verse is from the Sūrah of the Bee:

> "And there are those who emigrated in God's [path] after they had been oppressed. Surely, we will provide accomodations for them in this world that are good and the reward in the next world which is even greater." (16:40)

This theme appears in the "general proclamation of the mission" type correspondence. However, it usually is simply an introduction to the main hijrah theme of hijrah for jihād. The hijrah of the oppressed theme, with numerous Qur'ānic and ḥadīth citations is more prominent in letters of the Mahdī which are aimed more specifically at individuals, especially scholars. In these, it is associated primarily with the earlier idea of emigrating from wealth and property, to the path of *al-dīn*.

A good example of this is a letter "to al-Shaykh 'Abd al-Rusul" and others (Sha'bān 1299/June-July 1882).[18] In this letter the Mahdi makes the strong statements of condemnation, saying that those who oppose his Mahdiship are kāfirs, and he urges the addressees to make haste in emigrating to him, "even if you have to walk and leave all properties, relying solely on God". However, the emphasis in this message is on hijrah for the sake of leaving property and walking in the path of *al-dīn*, and hijrah as a refuge for the oppressed. In letters like this, the call for hijrah for the sake of jihād is at most part of the undertone of urgency and struggle, despite the fact that the rationale for the call to jihād is laid by the identification as kāfirs of those who do not believe in the Mahdī's mission.

This fourth usage of the concept of hijrah, as the first step to be taken in the path of jihād for the sake of God, is, however, the main hijrah theme in the general proclamations of the Mahdī's mission. In the da'wah letter discussed above, the statement and context are simple and clear. Hijrah is said to be obligatory in accord with the Qur'ān and Sunnah. The Qur'ānic verses that are cited here are not so much those talking about the emigration of the oppressed as those which call for obedience to the word of God: "Follow the path to me of the one who repents." The Mahdi says:

> If you understand that, then we command all responsible people to undertake the hijrah to us for the sake of jihad

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> in the path of God, or to the town closest to you, because of the saying of the Almighty: Fight those of the unbelievers who are near you.[19]

It is in the wording and spirit of this text that we get what I believe to be the primary use of the concept of hijrah by the Mahdi: it is part of the recruitment call, it is the first step in undertaking jihad. This concept of hijrah starts with the obligation to obey those appointed by God, and does not give much emphasis to oppressed people fleeing from their residences. In contrast to that form of the concept of hijrah, the recruitment use assumes that people are very comfortable where they are. They have to be threatened with damnation. The Mahdi, citing sūrah 9:38, puts the case clearly: "Oh you who believe, what's with you?[20] When it is said to you: Go in the path of God, you stand heavily on the ground. Are you more content with the life of this world than the Afterlife?"

In this it is useful to remember that this usage is different from that of Usuman dan Fodio or modern revivalists like Sayyid Quṭb, who associate hijrah with a condemnation of the existing society. In their writings, the call to hijrah is the call to move out of a society which has become jāhilī, or no longer is part of Dār al-Islām. The call to hijrah in that type of discussion is the conclusion of a critique of existing society.

The Mahdī, in contrast, seldom uses hijrah in conjunction with his critique of the existing social order. Instead, the command to undertake hijrah is part of the recruitment procedure for the ongoing jihād. Emphasis is on joining the army – whether it means going to the place where the Mahdī is or simply to the next town or wherever the battle is being fought.

In the many letters that the Mahdi wrote during the campaign to bring the Sūdān under the control of the Mahdiyyah, this theme seems to be a constant one. People are to undertake the hijrah to the Mahdī or some place where they can participate in the jihād. The hijrah is the sign of acceptance of and loyalty to the Mahdī's mission. In January 1882, for example, a group of scholars were reminded of their previous opposition to the Mahdī and told to make the hijrah to the Mahdi in Qadir[21]. Others are urged not to hinder those making the hijrah[22].

The gathering of the loyal followers seems to be the purpose of the hijrah. Those who have undertaken the hijrah become part of the armed forces of the Mahdi. This seems quite clear from a letter addressed specifically to the muhājirūn.[23] This letter discusses the problems of providing for all of the poorer muhājirūn and the need for those who have extra wealth to share

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it. It is all stated in terms of the mobilization of an armed force. There may be a further confirmation of this function of hijrah in the fact that there are occasional people whom the Mahdī excuses from the obligation of hijrah—and the reasons given are weakness and old age[24].

To summarize, in the writings of the Mahdī, there seem to be four usages of the concept of hijrah. The earliest is a more general one related to general activities of piety: people are told of the need to "emigrate" from the wealth of this world for the sake of *al-dīn*. The second is also related to the more general situation of pious believers. Those who are oppressed for their faith are encouraged to emigrate from their place of oppression. Both of these usages are based on traditionally wellknown verses in the Qur'ān and collections of ḥadīth. As such, these usages appear throughout Mahdist writings. They do not, however provide the dominant usage of the concept of hijrah.

The third and fourth usages are more directly related to the Sudanese Mahdiyyah. The Mahdī himself emigrated from Aba Island to Jabal Qadir and called this movement a "hijrah." This is the third usage: it sets an example. The Mahdi did not decide to emigrate by himself. He was commanded by the Prophet Muḥammad in a vision to undertake this hijrah. The description of that vision and the command became a standard part of the proclamation of the Mahdist da'wah.

I believe that the key to understanding the use of the concept of the Mahdī's hijrah is not that the Mahdī was simply trying to show that he was following the example of the Prophet. This clearly is, of course, part of it since the Mahdī did many things that were directly modeled upon the Prophet's life. However, I believe that the key is that the Mahdi undertook his hijrah *because he was commanded to do so by the Messenger of God.*

In the most common form of the proclamation of mission, the Qur'ānic verses that are associated with the Mahdī's call for hijrah are not the verses normally cited for hijrah. Instead, they are verses which incite the believers to follow the commands of the Messenger of God. The Mahdī is able to say that he himself has undertaken a hijrah because he was commanded to do so by the person appointed by God. He then proceeds to the fourth usage of hijrah: he, the Mahdī, commands people in the Sudan to undertake the hijrah, which in this case means joining the forces of the Mahdī in order to participate in the jihād. It seems to me that the two specifically Mahdist uses of the term hijrah are recruitment and justification of recruitment of people into the army. It is not so much, then, a matter of spirit and tone, adding pious images to the mission, as it is a matter of practical necessity.

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I am not saying that I think that the Mahdi was consciously manipulating a powerful symbol of the Islamic tradition. The attitude of some one like Trimingham leads to a significant type of misunderstanding of movements like the Mahdiyyah. Instead, I believe that the Mahdī was creatively developing the meaning of this powerful Islamic concept on the basis of his faith and experience. The concept of hijrah was one that was clearly a part of the symbolic vocabulary and worldview of Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Mahdī. Given the Qur'ānic basis for this concept, it is a natural development of its basic ideas of giving up wealth for the sake of the faith and of seeking refuge from oppression. The Mahdī, in his situation, saw hijrah as the divinely-commanded action, demonstrating that adherence to the Mahdiyyah should be more important than living in the safety and comfort of one's home. The hijrah, in this context, becomes the symbol of "conversion", of entering the new life which is defined by the mission and vision of the Mahdī.

Postscript. It might be noted that there was a further extension of the concept of hijrah in the days of the Khalīfah 'Abdallāhi. The command to undertake the hijrah came, at times, to be the command to come to the areas under the control of the central Mahdist government. This command was often given to individuals and groups who were suspected by the Khalīfah of posing a threat to his rule. Thus, hijrah became associated with the processes of discipline and staying in power.

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   Trimingham's footnote: "He performed a *hijra* to Jabal Qadir in the Nuba Mountains which he renamed Jabal Massa, in accordance with the belief that the Mahdi will come from the hill of that name where people will swear allegiance to him".
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7. Ibid. p. 129.
8. F.R. Wingate, *Mahdiism and the Egyptian Sudan* (London: Cass, 1968 (Reprint of 1891 edition)), p. 17.

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12. Abu Salim, *op. cit.* no: 13.
13. The text is translated from Na'um Shuqayr, *Tā'rīkh al-Sūdān al-Qadīm wa'l-Ḥadīth wa Jughrāfiyyatuhu* (Cairo: n.p., [1903], 3: 124-126). A garbled translation appears in Wingate, *op. cit.* pp. 40-42.
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21. Abū Sālim, no: 24.
22. *Ibid.,* no: 32, 551, 862.
23. *Ibid.,* no: 135 and *Manshūrāt,* vol. 1, pp. 44-45.
24. Abū Sālim, no: 879.

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